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Mapping Approaches to User Participation and Digital Labour: A Critical Perspective

Introduction

The last two decades have been awash with interpretations of the changes brought about by digital technologies and online social media. Many non-critical accounts have been quick to emphasize how these developments have empowered users by bringing possibilities for participation, global connectivity and generation of content that can seriously counter the formerly entrenched inequalities. By challenging such celebratory accounts in four dimensions, we suggest in this chapter an alternative, critical approach to user participation (section one). We maintain that relating user participation to digital labour substantiates the critical approach since it allows speaking of user participation as exploited and participating in the reproduction of social inequality (section two). We map two influential critical accounts to user exploitation in informational capitalism. Finally, we apply the suggested critical perspective to the concrete example of social media usage by taking Marx' understanding of the mode of production into account and situating the business model of social media within (section three).

The Wondrous Technologies: Theories Celebrating the Social Status Quo

Non-critical and celebratory approaches to social media and Web 2.0 do not use critical conceptual frameworks that would make possible a coherent analysis of Internet-based platforms as a part of capitalist accumulation cycle. Instead of speaking of digital labour they use concepts such as peer production, prosumption, produsage and crowdsourcing instead. This makes it difficult to differentiate even at the most basic political-economic level between digital practices where user cooperation and collaboration is being exploited for private profits (e.g. Google, Facebook) and activities that are instead focused at building a real commons-based society (e.g. Wikipedia). At the same time, these approaches view technological changes as revolutionary and disruptive, meaning they interpret existing social relations as completely different to previously existing historical relations. For Shirky (2008), technology is for example augmenting new organizational connections and seriously challenging older institutional forms. As he points out, “thanks to the web, the costs of publishing globally have collapsed,” (Ibid., 9) stories can “go from local to global in a heartbeat” (Ibid, 12), all the while “getting the free and ready participation of a large, distributed group with a variety of skills [...] has gone from impossible to simple.” Both technological and social reasons combine “to one big change: forming groups has gotten a lot easier,” (Ibid., 18) which means that obstacles for groups to “self-assemble”, even when they lack any finances, have basically collapsed (Ibid.). Shirky's account is comprised both of presenting changes as a disruptive revolution and as incomparable to anything similar in social history.

Celebratory accounts depicting developments in information and communication technologies are hardly novel. Dyer-Witheford (1999, 22-26) has for example combined statements of the key advocates of the coming “information society” into a revolutionary doctrine. Amongst several claims, which helped them to conceal the cold objectives of capital and legitimated a big technological reorganization, was that human society will enter a completely new phase, which will be global in its scope. It will bring about a knowledge society devoid of traditional class conflicts. Similar myths have appeared with the rise of the

Internet. Mosco (1982; 2004) for example wrote about “pushbutton fantasies” and “the digital sublime”, while Fisher (2010) described these accounts as “digital discourse”. As he noted this discourse celebrated network technologies and went far beyond only popular jargon, as it also entered academic, political, and economic circles. According to Curran (2012), celebratory accounts about the Internet asserted that technology will spur a radical economic transformation, which will be connected to great prosperity for all. It will bring about harmony between peoples of the world, enable completely novel approaches to politics and democracy, and also pave the way for a renaissance in journalism.

Non-critical, celebratory approaches do not deal with other less amicable processes that accompanied the rise and normalization of new information and communication technologies. They are devoid of issues such as globalized ubiquitous mass surveillance, intensive and extensive commodification, novel techniques of controlling and managing production process, or new and expanded ways of labour exploitation that all strengthen class inequalities. Even though celebration of technological changes has remained fundamentally flawed because of its one-sided interpretations, it remains of crucial importance to analyse the promises that are given in such accounts. This is so because refuting the myth is not enough; it also entails figuring out why it exists in the first place (Mosco 2004, 29). According to Mosco (2004), myths are socially important as they can offer an attractive vision of the future, meaning they help people to struggle with everyday antagonisms. This means they can be seen not only as post-political (as claimed by Barthes), but also as pre-political, because they indicate the location of social problems. Myth is also closely related to power however (ibid., 7). As pointed out by Mosco (ibid., 24), they “matter in part because they sometimes inspire powerful people to strive for their realization whatever the cost.” For myths to be successful, those in power must embrace them and keep them alive (ibid., 39; cf. Dyer-Witheford 1999; Fisher 2010). Celebratory mythological accounts embraced by political leaders, corporate executives, academics, journalists and researchers often not only describe the future; they in fact prescribe it (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 19, 22). In a manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, they generate a specific version of reality they predicted (ibid.).

Celebratory accounts are therefore important in understanding society, but they never take account of the “whole picture”. Our goal in this part of the chapter is to delineate from a critical perspective in what fundamental ways these mythological celebratory accounts are erroneous. With “fundamental”, we have in mind the most basic level of theoretical and epistemological presuppositions. Even though these are often only implicit in certain approaches and descriptions, they are always present and thus in many ways set the stage for social research, while also influencing its results. Celebratory and often other non-critical approaches as well lack: (a) an in-depth historical awareness, which leads them to interpret social changes in terms of complete discontinuity; (b) a holistic framework that would enable them to analyse and interpret social phenomena as parts of social totality, because it is always the wider context that influences their development and role in society, which means they cannot be analysed in isolation; (c) a focus on contradictions, antagonisms, and power relations, which are entrenched in capitalist social relations. Ignoring these basic issues leads celebratory approaches to interpret the existing social relations as “the best of all possible worlds”, because they also lack (d) a real normative underpinning, while they simultaneously take for granted specific social formations such as capitalist market or commodity.

Critical authors often see historical dimension as a crucial part of criticality as it can show temporality of social formations: how they emerged in certain historical context and power relations distinctive of it and, consequently, how and why they could dissolve (see Smythe 1971/1978; Wallerstein, 1999; 1991/2001; Bonefeld 2009: 125). Celebratory approaches lack such historical awareness; they are

either ahistorical, quasi-historical or even anti-historical. Proponents of the buzzword *produser*, which combines usage and production into supposedly completely new phenomena, for example point out that “new terms like produsage can act as a creative disruption to the scholarly process, enabling us to take a fresh look at emerging phenomena *without carrying the burden of several centuries of definition and redefinition*.” (Bruns and Schmidt 2011, 4, our emphasis) In this case historicity is a problem, because Web 2.0 brought about so completely new social phenomena that they could not be associated in any way to the concepts used during the industrial revolution.

When history is not altogether missing or outright rejected, celebratory approaches are quasi-historical at best. Superficial historical insights are used to demonstrate how the existing society is completely different from what it used to be. The change is in fact so vast as to constitute a revolutionary disruption. For Benkler (2006) the “networked information economy” of “decentralized individual action” for instance brought about a “radical change in the organization of information production” and a break with the “industrial information economy.” For him the change is so structurally deep that it transforms “the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have coevolved for almost two centuries.” (Ibid., 1) Shirky (2008) uses similar arguments. According to him, it is because of social media that “we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations.” (Ibid., 20-21) Instead of seeing changes in terms of a radical rupture and complete discontinuity, they must - in our opinion - be necessarily understood in terms of a dialectical contradiction between enduring continuities and important discontinuities (Fuchs 2012b; 2014b, 53–55; Prodnik 2014, 146-148). The persistent continuities are the inequalities, exploitation and antagonisms distinctive of capitalism.

The inability to think of social phenomena as parts of totality is related closely both to historical ignorance and to non-existent normative basis of celebratory approaches. It is by naturalizing social formations such as exploitation that one can ignore its role throughout history and overlook how it often leads to class antagonisms, because not everyone benefits in the same way from technological developments (Mosco 1982). It is by ignoring contradictions and conflicts emerging from social totality that one cannot imagine a normatively different alternative to the status quo, because for celebratory authors a better society will be an automatic consequence of new technologies. These flawed theoretical presuppositions are therefore mutually interconnected and supportive of each other. For Benkler (2006), the “increasingly information dependent global economy”, which is itself revolutionary, will enable “individual freedom”, full-blown “democratic participation” and “a more critical and self-reflective culture,” leading to “human development everywhere.” (Ibid., 2)

Labour and exploitation vanish from the conceptual apparatus of celebratory authors as if these phenomena do not exist. In this sense the mentioned approaches are fetishistic (Marx 1867/1976, 163-177), because even when the production process is analysed this is done outside of intensified commodification, inequalities and the wider global capitalist accumulation and commodity chains, which are all indispensable for these technologies to even be possible (see Fuchs 2014a). In non-critical approaches categories that could lead to critical appraisal are replaced by euphemisms such as “productive participation” (Bruns and Schmidt 2011, 5) or “commons-based peer production” that is supposedly based in decentralized collaboration of non-proprietary and non-monetary sharing (Benkler 2006, 60). For O’Reilly (2005), who popularized the buzzword Web 2.0, this concept similarly denoted dynamic and collaborative platforms that “harness collective intelligence” and feed on the “wisdom of

crowds”. In his view Web 2.0 allows novel “architecture of participation” and is consequently turned “into a kind of global brain.”

O’Reilly (2005) in fact acknowledged that “users add value”, but also added they will rarely do it intentionally. He proposed that Web 2.0 companies should therefore “set inclusive defaults for aggregating user data and building value as a side-effect of ordinary use of application.” As in other administrative non-critical scholarship he focuses “on technology without taking into account its embeddedness into power structures.” (Fuchs 2014b, 56) It is beside the point for O’Reilly that aggregating user data, which he cherishes, entails mass surveillance and that adding value necessitates labour and economic exploitation.

The Digital Labour Debate: How to Think of Exploited User Participation?

Theorizing user participation becomes a critical endeavour distinguished from a celebratory approach when it is related to exploitation; thus a social structure that permanently reproduces inequality. Most generally, exploitation means that one social group profits more from the achievements of another group than the latter group itself is able to profit from their own achievements. Erik Olin Wright (1997, 10) argues that exploitation entails three aspects: First, inverse interdependent welfare, the wealth of social groups is dependent on other social groups that profit less. Second, exclusion, social groups ensure that the other social groups are excluded from the profit generating conditions and the profit itself (through private property rights). Third, social groups are able to appropriate the wealth created by other social groups.

The notion of exploitation, although widely associated with Marx’s writings, was not invented by him. He, however, gave the theory of exploitation a certain twist when he incorporated it into his own theory of value:

First, Marx conceptualizes “achievements” as surplus deriving from the fruits of labour (1867/1976, 344) and at this point, he affirms the labour theory of value that was dominant in classical political economy. In the debate about digital labour, this is a first controversial issue that entails two social philosophical aspects (see Fuchs and Seignani 2013). On the one hand, whether it is appropriate to frame user participation on the Internet as work or is it something different, such as interaction, symbolic expression, or simply pleasure? Does the quality of an activity, e.g. pleasurable user participation, determine if it is work or not? On the other hand, does something new emerge from user participation that transcends an existing base?

Second, Marx observes that wealth appears in capitalist societies in commodity form and defines value as a capitalist social relation. In doing so, he leaves behind a naturalistic and social philosophical understanding of value towards a sociological analysis. How much value a commodity has, cannot be determined by counting concrete labour time that was necessary to produce it, but by the labour time that is socially necessary to produce it. In capitalism, where products are produced privately for the market, there is no entity that is able to account the time socially necessary to produce any commodity as it would exist in a planned economy. Socially necessary labour time is not known a priori but comes to light only a posteriori through the social praxis of exchange on the market. How valuable any production was is principally uncertain and the social relation that determines it is one not mediated by conscious value orientation of the people, but exercises itself behind the peoples’ backs mediated by their labour products (Marx 1867/1976, 135).

Consequently, Marx connects the theory of exploitation to his value theory and maintains that in capitalism the exploitation of the fruits of labour/socially produced surplus takes on a “more refined and civilized” (1867/1976, 486) quality that makes it distinct from earlier forms of society and accords it to specific social form of wealth creation in capitalism. Exploitation is organised through labour markets, where labourers have specific state-guaranteed rights and freedoms that frees them not only from personal dependences but also from controlling the conditions for the realisation of their labour to make ends meet. The wage form, that is labour power becoming a commodity exchangeable for money, is a crucial consequence of the capitalist development and integrates the older concept of exploitation into the mechanism of market societies.

If value and surplus value is redefined in capitalism as a market relation then labour spent outside this relation may be necessary but is not valuable in the strict sense. This is why Marx comes to say that being a productive value creating labourer “is not a piece of luck, but a misfortune” (1867/1976, 644) since value creation is an alienated and, for the labourer additionally, an other-directed activity, which sustains its exploitation albeit society provides him or her with certain freedoms. In terms of digital labour, there is much debate whether e.g. user participation is subsumed by the capital relation and can count as productive value creating activity and how this should be normatively and politically evaluated. It poses questions such as if there is such thing as a double free Internet user, whether users’ participating activities are actually exchanged, and whether they are subsumed to capitalist control.

Third, a further problematic aspect is included in Marx’s value theory: Not only labour outside the capital relation appears as unproductive but also all labour spent in circulation. Marx distinguishes production from circulation and this distinction presupposes a standpoint that observes the entire economic process and not only that of a single corporation seeking profits. The latter sphere includes all labour necessary that a production can be started, e.g. labour in the finance industry that helps to provide money to undertake production, as well as all labour that is necessary that a product actually can be sold, e.g. labour that becomes necessary for marketing. Although these labours may all be completely subsumed under the capital relation (wage labour produces commodities for profit purposes), they do not count as productive (Mohun 2002). Here it appears that the value theory and therefore the theory of exploitation, which Marx set out to reframe, is still a valid presupposition in his mind. Value is obviously not solely defined by the capital relation but also by material aspects in the sense that it finally relates to the satisfaction of needs and must produce use values that are not functional to the capital relation. Marx’s theory therefore oscillates between a social philosophical and a strictly sociological approach. In terms of user participation, it is an ongoing matter of dispute whether users participate productively or whether their activity is based in the circulation sphere thus being unproductive.

What we can retrieve from the previous brief introduction regarding the notion of exploitation and its framing by Marx are several questions that a critical theory of user participation should give answers to. Against this background, two main approaches how to understand user participation critically have developed. The first approach situates itself within the Smythian tradition of critical communication studies (Smythe 1977/2006; Jhally and Livant 1986; currently most prominently represented by the works of Fuchs 2014a; 2014b, but see also Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Andrejevic 2015). The second approach is based on a rethinking of Marx’s concept of rent in the digital age (Pasquinelli 2009; Caraway 2011; Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012; Huws 2014; Quellet 2015).

Dallas Smythe first speaks of the commodification of audiences through the corporate media (1977/2006). Just like labour power was commodified and became exchangeable on markets with the rise of capitalism, audience power is now traded in the media industry. With the rise of a “surveillance-driven

culture production” (Turow 2005, 113) most Internet services rely on advertising as their business model, Smythe’s notion of audience power was rethought. Fuchs argues that “advertisers are not only interested in the time that users spend online, but also in the products that are created during this time – user generated digital content and online behaviour” (2012, 704). The “work of being watched” (Andrejevic 2002) is now a key quality of using the Internet and the user participates in the production of the service. He or she is therefore a “prosumer” or “produser”. Fuchs and others within this strand generally highlight a correlation between user base and revenues (Andrejevic 2015, 7) in terms of extensity and intensity of time spent online from which they derive their notion of the exploited Internet user.

The second approach does not focus as much on active time spent online but on competitive advantages that strong user base epitomises for those, who want to sell commodities. Rent is here the key mechanism to make profits for Internet corporations. Rent is an opportunity to extract surplus value that is produced elsewhere including, for instance, offline production sites (Marx 1894/1991, ch. 37-47). Marx himself situates rent solely in the context of natural sources, such as for example waterfalls that make mills much more productive than if they would be situated in a normal river. More recently, rent was related to culturally produced sites (Harvey 2001) and Internet business models (Foley 2013). This reconceptualization enables us to think that human activity is involved in establishing the preconditions of rent seeking. A monopoly, e.g. in access to a wide user base, is exchanged for money with somebody who thinks that her or his own business can be enhanced through it. The costs for access (rent) are a reduction of profits, but an economically rational one, since this allows a realisation of higher profits than competitors can do without it. Having access to Facebook’s user base may from an economic perspective be more sensible than to advertise a commodity on a site with much less users or in a newspaper.

First, in contrast to prosumer approaches, rent approaches do not rely on qualifying Internet usage as labour (Jin and Feenberg 2015) but also do not exclude it. For instance, Bolin (2009) maintains that users do not work, but only employees, who operate the software and pack user data into commodities. Robinson (2015, 47) argues that user data are not the product of labour since leaving traces on the Internet is not an intentional activity. Proponents of immaterial labour theory are, however, notable exceptions in this regard. They see a general change in the quality of work in cognitive capitalism, which broadens the meaning of labour to more autonomous forms that cannot be immediately realised as labour (Terranova 2000), but none the less stress the relevance of the rentier economy, which they see as an expression of a comprehensive change of capitalism (Vercellone 2010). Prosumer approaches also make use of a broad understanding of labour, including cognitive, communicative, and cooperative aspects (Fuchs and Seignani 2013).

Second, is user participation subsumed under the capital-value relation? Undoubtedly, Internet users are free to exchange in markets. They are legally independent actors that consent to Internet services’ terms of use and no authority forces them to use a particular service. Prosumer approaches would argue that they are also free from the means of communication (Hebblewhite 2012), which exercises force over them to use at least one of the available commercial services in a highly concentrated Internet to be able to benefit from its various functions and generally to socialise and live a good thus connected life under given circumstances. Rent approaches, on the other hand, maintain that there are alternative (also non-commercial) services available and the power to migrate from one service to another outweighs the coercion (Robinson 2015, 49f.). These approaches would therefore deny one aspect of the double freedom mentioned by Marx. The degree of subsumption of user activities under capital’s control, of course, relates to this second form of freedom. On the one hand, the rent based capital accumulation model prevailed on the Internet has to do with the increasing autonomy of labour and a decrease of capital

control (Vercellone 2010). Prosumer approaches challenge this assumption, arguing that extensive means of surveillance and resulting privacy outrages exemplify continuing capital control that conflicts with user control. Due to accumulated money and network power capital is able to set the terms of using the Internet by determining online information flows, e.g. on social media wall pages, and clicking behaviour according to their business interests (Sevignani 2015).

One crucial aspect of capital control is bringing labour activity into the wage form (Huws 2015). Clearly, there is no monetary wage for using most of the Internet services. There are, however, approaches that see the access to the social media service as comparable to a paid wage (Jhally and Livant 1986; Rey 2012), one could speak at this point of a service wage. This position risks underestimating the relevance of money as a universal equivalent in capitalism and its necessary function to make ends meet through its ability to buy any commodity (Fuchs 2012, 703; Huws 2015, 175). Prosumer approaches point to the existence of legally binding terms of use that grant Internet services extensive property rights of user-generated content and speak of hyper exploitation since no amount of money is paid back to the prosumer in exchange of these rights (Fuchs 2010). Rent approaches are “wage-centrist” and stress the existence of a monetary exchange between providers and users as a precondition not only for effective rights to control user activity but also for speaking of exploitation in a precisely Marxian meaning of value and therefore exploited surplus value (Comor 2015). Those who stress the relevance of user activities’ subsumption under capital on behalf of the wage form make the point that mere commodification, which is making e.g. any user-generated content exchangeable, would not suffice to speak of exploitation since, e.g. data traces, are not produced under capital’s control but are appropriated later by it for profit purposes (for the so called ongoing primitive accumulation see Böhm, Land, and Averungen 2012). On the contrary, prosumer approaches downplay the relevance of an actually paid wage for speaking about Internet users’ subsumption under capital.

Third, even it is accepted that user participation is within the subsumed to capital, one can still hold that it is not productive and exploitable in a strict sense. Robinson (2015) argues that labour put into marketing, including advertising, although necessary for capital is not a value producing activity. Consequently, user participation that e.g. creates data traces applied for advertising purposes is unproductive and not exploitable. Rent theory reserves value producing activity, productive labour, to labour that is actually exchanged on markets and is applied to produce and not to sell a commodity. Prosumer approaches, on the other hand, point to labour time as the substance of value and surplus value (Fuchs 2014a). Here the tie between exploitable surplus value and market exchange is softened.

Prosumer approaches point to the productive quality of user participation in a twofold sense; they can thus be named productive prosumer approaches: Users’ activity is not only subsumed to the capital-value relation but is also at the heart of the capital circuit and not merely circulation work. They for instance make the point that users are a kind of productive transport workers and accelerate the turnover time of capital (Fuchs 2014a). Generally they tend to argue that capital entails the tendency to subsume entire society and it is hard to speak of any activity external to capital that may be necessary for its reproduction but is not part of it. Simultaneously, they point to the fragility of distinction between circulation and production. Rent approaches tend to deny both and emphasise the ongoing relevance of both distinctions, which must be drawn from the standpoint of total society and cannot be drawn from a single capital or workers perspective.

To conclude, both approaches can speak of exploitation if they qualify user participation as work creating something new. They, however, split in their assessment whether user participation is exploited in a specific capitalist way. However, political evaluations of the users’ potential exploitation are not

connected to a specific approach. On the one hand, it may be seen positively when Internet users are not exploited, since it means that this realm is not determined by capital and may be a germ form of another society. On the other hand, it may be evaluated negatively since being productive and exploited simultaneously means being at the power centre of capital's reproduction and has the potential to break with the capital relations from within. In this sense, Fuchs (2014a), from the viewpoint of a productive prosumer approach, and Ursula Huws (2014), defending the rent approach, both highlight that questions of value and exploitation theory are of immediate relevance for class analysis and, ultimately, a rationally informed class struggle against exploitation. Of course, they differ in their assessment of user participation: Fuchs seeks to include it in the core of capital's reproduction holding that it is productive prosumer activity; Huws may concede that user participation is relevant for reproduction but situates it outside the "knot" of the capital relation.

Critical Perspectives on Social Media: The Dialectics of Productive Forces and Relations of Production

After having mapped both celebratory and critical, as well as varieties of critical approaches, we now apply the critical perspective to the concrete example of commercial social media in the final section. We therefore take Marx' understanding of the mode of production and the dialectics of productive forces and relations into account and try to situate the exploitative business model of corporate social media platforms within.

The mode of production of social media is based on productive forces including social media users and objects and instruments of labour as well as relations of production of social media owners and users (see Figure 1).

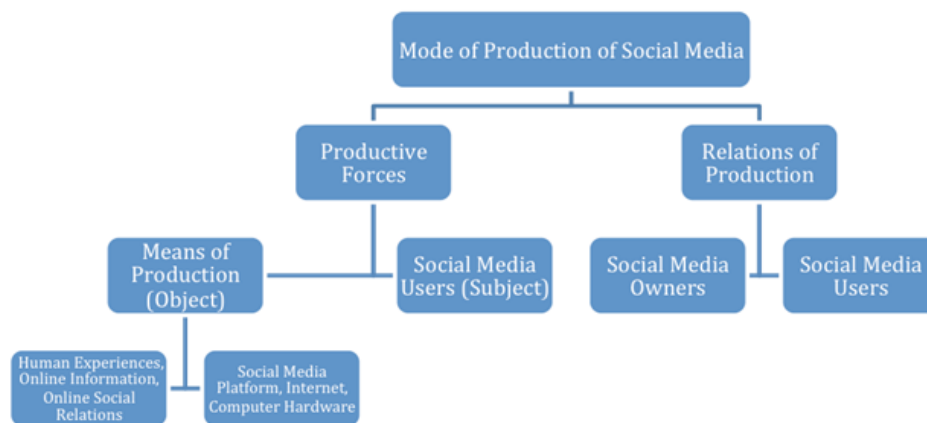


Figure 1: Mode of production of social media

The productive forces of social media are a system of social media users and facts and factors of the process of social media production that cause and influence online labour. The relationship between social media users (subject) and means of production (object) forms the productive forces of social media. On the one hand, subjective productive forces are the unity of physical and intellectual abilities of a social media user. On the other hand, objective productive forces are factors of the process of digital labour; that is, objects of digital labour such as human experiences, online information, and online social relations (Fuchs and Seignani 2013, 255) and instruments of digital labour including social media platforms, the

Internet, and digital devices (desktop, laptop, tablet, mobile phone, etc.). Social media users make use of PCs, the Internet, and social media platforms in order to establish and organize human experiences, online information, and online social relations. These are “the general productive forces of the social brain” (Marx 1997). The process is extinguished in the product and includes online profiles, new social relationships, and new community buildings.

The process of social media production takes place within certain social structures; that is to say, relations of production of social media owner and users. The principle of web 2.0 platforms is the massive provision and storage of personal(ly) (identifiable) data being systematically evaluated, marketed, and used for targeted advertising. With the help of legal instruments including privacy policies and terms of use, social networking sites have the right to store, analyse, and sell personal data of their users to third parties for targeted advertising in order to accumulate profit. Social media activities such as creating profiles and sharing ideas on Facebook, announcing personal messages on Twitter, uploading or watching videos on YouTube, and writing personal entries on Blogger, enable the collection, analysis, and sale of personal data by commercial web platforms. Web 2.0 applications and social software sites collect and analyse personal behaviour, preferences, and interests with the help of systematic and automated computer processes and sell these data to advertising agencies in order to accumulate profit. Online time is monitored, stored, and packaged together to data commodities and advertising clients purchase this online data packages in order to be able to advertise their products to user groups. An asymmetrical economic power relation characterizes web 2.0, because companies own the platform, the data of their users, and the profit, and decide on terms of use and privacy policies. While the users do not share ownership rights at all, do not control corporate social media platforms, have no right to decide on terms of use and privacy policies, and do not benefit from the profit being created out of user data produced for free. Commercial new media accumulate capital by dispossession (Harvey 2003) of personal information and data being produced in social and creative processes. This process can be considered as the accumulation by dispossession on web 2.0 (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2010). From the point of view of the productive forces, social media are tools that entail social and communicative characteristics. From the point of view of the relations of production, the structure of corporate social media primarily maximizes power of the dominating economic class that owns such platforms and benefits the few at the expense of the many. Social media platforms are unsocial capitalist corporations. It thus makes sense to speak about (un)social media in capitalist society.

The mode of production of social media is based on a dialectical relationship of productive forces and relations of production. The economic structure enables and constrains the development of the productive forces, which form the relations of production. The competition between Facebook, Google, Myspace, Twitter, Blogger, LinkedIn etc. force every company to increase users on a quantitative and qualitative level and integrate ever more services into their platform in order to accumulate profit. The social networking business can be considered as a dynamic and very competitive online field with potential economic ups and downs. For example, the social networking service Google+ was launched in June 2011. The launch of Google+ was as a further attempt of Google to rival Facebook and others, after previous forays into the social media economy such as Orkut (launched in 2004, now operated entirely by Google Brazil), Google Friend Connect (launched 2008, retired 2012), and Google Buzz (launched 2010, retired in 2011) had failed. Google+ is operated by Google and has now 135 million active monthly users (Google Official Blog 2012). This shows that the relations of production and competition drive the development of the productive forces of corporate social media forward. When people (having a digital device and an Internet access) signing up as users and creating profiles on Facebook, accepting the data

use policy, and expressing their experiences and enter online relations being controlled by capital, they simultaneously accept the ownership of the platform and reproduce the relation between Facebook and their users. This indicates that the productive forces form the relations of production of social media.

Commercial social media present themselves as platforms enabling sociability, networking, connectivity, and communication. Facebook (2015) says that its “mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”. In reference to Marx, the social and communicative qualities can be interpreted as the use value of social media. A use value reveals out of different qualities of products and exists, if usefulness occurs and human needs can be fulfilled. The usefulness emerges out of the material nature of things. Use values are only realized in consumption. The maintenance of existing contacts, friendships, and family relations, social relationships over spatial distances, information and news, finding and renewing old contacts, sharing photos and other media, and establishing new contacts occur as the usefulness of new media fulfilling human needs. The use value of social media is realized in using such platforms. Just as sitting on it might be the use value of a chair, so the realization of social and communicative characteristics is the use value of social media.

But the specific characteristic of the capitalist mode of production is that a use value of a commodity is only a means to an end in order to produce an exchange value of a commodity. The use values “are also the material bearers [*Träger*] of ... exchange-value” (Marx 1976, 126). The use value is therefore the condition of the exchange value. The exchange value is a social form and only realized through social exchange. If a thing is not only a use value, but also an exchange value, it evolves to a commodity. The exchange value expresses the commodity value in the form of money.

Because commercial web platforms exchange data for money in terms of selling the data commodity on the market that is expressed in the form of money, one can argue that the monitoring, surveillance, analysis, and sale of private data are the exchange value of social media transforming personal data to commodities.

Corporate social media usage is the connection of use and exchange value. Social media platforms simultaneously satisfy user needs and serve profit interests and are means of communication and means of production (Fisher 2012, 174-177). Human sociality is used for capital accumulation.

The leading discourse that “‘social media’ are new (‘web 2.0’), pose new opportunities for participation, will bring about an ‘economic democracy’, enable new forms of political struggle (‘Twitter revolution’), more democracy (‘participatory culture’), etc” (Fuchs 2012, 698) strengthen the ideological agenda of privately-owned social networking platform owners. Due to the fact that a large part of social medias’ revenue comes from advertising and thus depending on the extensity and intensity of users, it is very important to promote the benefits and to hide profit interests in order to keep a good image of the service as well as to avoid a reduction of users. The survey results might be seen in this context. The exchange value and commodity character of social media conceals behind the use value in public discourse and in commercial social media’s self-presentation. Social media platforms are “playground and factory” (Scholz 2013). The contemporary Internet is both a social medium and a new space of capital accumulation with ideological tendencies of revealing the first and simultaneously concealing the second. The new media user apparently considers him/herself as being a social and creative subject (see Allmer 2015), but is treated as object serving platform owners’ capital interests. The following contradiction forms the usage of social media and is partly reflected in our study results: The appearance of social networking sites in terms of being a tool of socialising and networking and the existence of social networking sites in terms of being a massive surveillance machinery of profit accumulation and the total commodification of online social relations and human life.

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